

**Muslim Minorities In Transitional Societies**  
**Different Myanmar Muslim Groups' Different Experiences In Transition**

Nyi Nyi Kyaw  
PhD Candidate, University of New South Wales, Canberra  
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**Abstract**

Political and social liberalizations in Myanmar since 2011 have received wide acclaim especially from the international community. However, the experience on the part of Myanmar has not been a bed of roses. With the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and occurrence of violent sectarian conflicts in 2012 and 2013, the 'Myanmar Muslim minority' has caught the headlines and attention of both academic and policy circles in the international domain. It generally holds true that Myanmar Muslims have experienced social suffering and an identity crisis as a community over the last three years. The issue of the Rohingya, who have suffered most, has understandably become the dominant topic in all the talks and writings on Myanmar Muslims in general. However, there are a few other Muslim minorities whose experiences in the transition have been different depending on their identity and dwelling place. This paper will highlight the experiences of two Muslim groups in Myanmar – ethnic Kamans and Mandalayan Muslims – who have also been affected by the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and violent/non-violent conflicts and argue that their sufferings different from the Rohingya's imply that there are Muslim minorities, not a Muslim minority, in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Myanmar, Muslim minority, minorities, social suffering, transition.

**Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence as Challenge of Transition in Myanmar**

Myanmar's political and social liberalization since 2011 could be traced to the holding of a sham general election in November 2010, which was neither fair nor fair,<sup>1</sup> by the previous military regime (State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC)). After the election was successfully held by SPDC, the current quasi-civilian government headed by President U Thein Sein, ex-general and ex-prime minister during the previous military rule, came to power in late March 2011. However, SPDC signaled its apparently serious intention to reform by the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, then secretary general of National League for Democracy (NLD), from a house arrest spanning fifteen years during the period from July 1989 to November 2010 and set out a reform agenda with initiation of significant political changes.

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<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama said of the 2010 election in Myanmar: "It is unacceptable to steal an election, as the regime in Burma has done again for all the world to see." Voice of America, "Obama: Burma's Government Steals Election," 7 November 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/content/obama-says-burmese-government-stole-election-106881289/130098.html> [Accessed 29 June 2015]

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Apart from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's release, other significant political and social changes or reforms include but are not limited to: release from prison of many other political dissidents such as Min Ko Naing of the '88 Generation Students Group (now the '88 Generation Peace & Open Society); removal of the clause in the Political Parties Registration Law which banned ex-prisoners from joining political parties which paved the way for NLD to register and compete in the by-elections of April 2012; entry of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with her forty-two NLD comrades as members of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament); elimination of notorious draconian press censorship and emergence of a largely free private press; holding of ceasefire and peace negotiation talks with ethnic armed insurgent groups; and allowing ordinary people to enjoy political and civil rights to a significant extent especially in terms of freedoms of expression, of association, and of assembly.

Due to these significant reforms, the years 2011 and 2012 were an unprecedented moment of jubilation for President U Thein Sein and his administration because they garnered praises from various corners of the international community. The mantra of "Burma (or Myanmar) is changing!" was repeatedly chanted in the media and at international policy tables out of Myanmar although a number of commentators were cautiously optimistic. Unfortunately, political euphoria within and without Myanmar did not last long. Myanmar faced a series of unprecedented sectarian violence between Rakhine Buddhists on one hand and Rohingya/non-Rohingya Muslims on the other hand in Rakhine State in 2012 and in other places in 2013 and 2014 (Meiktila (March 2013), Okkan (April 2013), Lashio (May 2013), Kanbalu (August 2013), and Mandalay (July 2014)). Since Muslims bore the brunt during and after all of these violent episodes, the international community started portraying what happened as anti-Muslim. Again, even among Muslims, Rohingyas were disproportionately affected due to their incessantly disputed identity and belonging to Myanmar.

There are a number of contextual factors which include both causes and causers, following the designation by Samuel Huntington (1991) in his seminal study of democratization, which led to the outbreak of those conflicts. A few organizational and individual authors have pinpointed the adverse impact of transition (International Crisis Group 2013), involvement of the state (Maung Zarni 2013), failure of the state to protect (Human Rights Watch 2012; Physicians for Human Rights 2013); role of the hidden hands (Justice Trust 2015); partial role of media (Dolan and Gray 2014); and Islamophobic mobilizations by Buddhist nationalist groups such as 969 and Ma-Ba-Tha (Nyi Nyi Kyaw forthcoming; Walton and Hayward 2014).

Many observers may assume that those violent episodes in Rakhine State and other places of Myanmar only directly affected Muslims in those particular places of violence. For example, the Rakhine violence may not be said to affect Muslims in Yangon. However, although many, if not most, people in Myanmar has long exhibited anti-Muslim prejudices since the colonial period, a nationwide hate campaign targeting Muslims as a community is unprecedented. The anti-Muslim hate campaign, which is believed to have played at least an indirect, if not direct, role in all those above-mentioned anti-Muslim violent episodes, is spearheaded by the now world-famous 969 movement and its parent body, *Ma-Ba-Tha* or literally Organization for Protection of Race and Religion, both of which are composed of monks and lay Buddhists in order to evade the restriction imposed by the

State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the supreme body which oversees affairs relating to the Buddhist Sangha in Myanmar.

The 969 and *Ma-Ba-Tha* campaign has clamored over the last three years that Muslim men, who are polygamous and hyper-fertile, have a mission to Islamize Myanmar by luring Buddhist women into interfaith marriage and converting the latter to Islam. Moreover, according to 969 and *Ma-Ba-Tha*, Muslims only buy from Muslim-owned shops in order to make their own community richer which will enable them to lure Buddhist women of low socio-economic backgrounds. This Muslim conspiratorial scheme must be stopped immediately in order to protect Buddhist Myanmar from the eminent danger of being swept away by Islamization. Therefore, 969 and *Ma-Ba-Tha* campaigners have militantly demanded two things: to stop transacting with Muslims and to buy Buddhist; and to draft and pass four race and religion protection bills (Nyi Nyi Kyaw forthcoming).<sup>2</sup>

The principal rhetorical strategy the 969 and *Ma-Ba-Tha* monks, most prominently Ashin Wirathu, have adopted is incessant and militant bombardment of their message through a nation-wide dissemination of their anti-Muslim message. The channels of communication that they have employed so far include sermons by Buddhist monks, talks by laypeople together with photo shows, weekly and bi-weekly journals, pamphlets, statements, pictures, songs, conferences, stories, books, movies, and social media (mainly Facebook). Those materials circulating in the streets, on social media and at bookshops and meetings, which are extremely inflammatory and may instigate conflicts, have largely created a siege mentality among Muslims across Myanmar. Muslims have been called illegal migrants, dogs, African caps, Jihadists, ungrateful guests, *kalas*, etc. It is notable that although those anti-Muslim monks claim that they are doing so due to the Muslim threat or implicitly due to a centuries-old siege Buddhist mentality (Kyaw San Wai 2014), the unexpected result of their three-year campaign is the emergence and maintenance of a Muslim siege mentality in Myanmar.

Contextually, despite repeated promises by President U Thein Sein that he would not allow spread of hatred in the country, the anti-Muslim movement of *Ma-Ba-Tha* has remained unchecked and even exponentially grown over the past three years. He is even reported to be in close touch with the leaders of the movement, including Ashin Wirathu, according to reliable sources (Min Zin 2014). Moreover, he was the one who asked in February 2014 the parliament to draft the four race and protection bills demanded by *Ma-Ba-Tha* by garnering 1.3 million signatures from the people (Lawi Weng 2014a). When the parliament said the government was responsible for drafting such bills, he was the also the one who proceeded to form a special committee for the two bills on religious conversion and population growth control and suggest that the Supreme Court of the Union of Myanmar draft the other two on interfaith marriage and monogamy (Lawi Weng 2014b).<sup>3</sup> All of these anti-Muslim violence, hate campaign, and legislative reforms in the area of race and religion are in strong support of the argument that Muslims in general, regardless of their background, legal

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<sup>2</sup> The bills will not be discussed in detail here.

<sup>3</sup> There are many recent developments in race and religion legislation which are beyond the scope of this paper.

citizenship and residence, have suffered social suffering during the last three years of Myanmar's bumpy democratic transition.

For this particular reason, the international community over the last three years has tended to homogenize Muslims of Myanmar and construct a besieged Muslim minority being terrorized by a Buddhist majority in Myanmar. It is undeniable that Myanmar's Muslims in general have experienced social suffering and an identity crisis as a community over the last three years or so. The issue of the Rohingya, who have suffered most, has understandably become the dominant topic in all the talks and writings on Myanmar Muslims. However, there are a few other Muslim minorities whose experiences in the transition have been different depending on their identity and dwelling place. This paper will highlight the experiences of two Muslim groups in Myanmar – ethnic Kamans and Mandalay Muslims – who have also been affected by the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and violent/non-violent conflicts and argue that their sufferings different from the Rohingya's imply that there are Muslim minorities, not a Muslim minority, in Myanmar.

### **Kaman Muslims During and After Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State in 2012**

Unprecedented sectarian violence rocked Rakhine State for two rounds in June and October 2012.<sup>4</sup> The violence and its aftermath presented itself as an intractable obstacle to Myanmar's political trajectory because they resulted in the re-emergence of old issues and emergence of new ones, all of which are extremely emotional and sensitive to the government and people of Myanmar and surround the Muslim question. Let us first see what happened in Rakhine State in 2012 before I move to discuss the trajectory of Kaman identity.

There are a number of contextual factors which include both causes and causers, following the designation by Samuel Huntington (1991) in his seminal study of democratization, behind the occurrence of the sectarian violence in Rakhine State in 2012, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is now an almost universal consensus that the first round of violence was provoked by the alleged rape, robbery, and murder of a Rakhine Buddhist woman, by the name of Ma Thida Htwe, by three Muslim men on 28 May in Kyauknimaw in Yanbye township in Rakhine State. A hate campaign followed when the news of the criminal case with a photo in which Ma Thida Htwe is seen lying dead in blood with stab wounds circulated on social media. A pamphlet which graphically described the case and demonized Muslims of Rakhine State was reportedly distributed in Taungup, another town in the state. This unfortunately led to a vigilante lynching and killing of ten Muslim passengers (eight from the middle of Myanmar travelling on a religious itinerary and two from Thandwe) on a bus from Thandwe to Yangon by a Rakhine Buddhist mob in Taungup on 3 June, apparently provoked by the pamphlet and what had happened a few earlier. Gruesome photos of ten Muslims again appeared on social media. The three state newspapers issued on 5 June – the *Myanma Alinn Daily* (p. 7) and the *Mirror* (p. 5) published by the Ministry of Information and the *Myawady Daily* (p. 9) published by the military – reported the news of the killing by using *kala* which

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<sup>4</sup> Actually, the period between June and October in 2012 were not free from conflicts either. There were small-scale incidents which pitted Rakhine Buddhists against Muslims in August and September (Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, 2013, pp. 12-13).

almost all of Muslims in Myanmar find vulgar and derogatory especially when it is used in public by the state. A group of Muslims protested against the use in front of a central mosque in downtown Yangon on the same day. The newspapers issued the next day included a correction and changed *kala* with Muslims living within Myanmar.

However, the tensions did not subside and a gathering storm was just around the corner. A serious riot broke out in Maungdaw where Rakhine Buddhists are a numerical minority in the afternoon of 8 June when Muslims, almost all being Rohingya, burned Rakhine Buddhist-owned houses and properties and killed a number of Rakhine Buddhists. This resulted in revenge by Rakhine Buddhists upon Muslims in other parts of Rakhine State where the latter are the minority. Eventually, the riotous conflicts became the most serious sectarian episode in Myanmar's or Rakhine State's history since independence.<sup>5</sup> The first round of violence in Rakhine State in June 2012 was seemingly spontaneous although various questions may be asked about the hidden role of the state which apparently failed to manage its spread across the whole of Rakhine State. It did not largely affect the Kamans although Rohingya and other Muslims were involved.

A second round of violence broke out in October when Muslims were disproportionately affected since it did not occur in northern Rakhine State where Rohingyas are the majority. This time Kamans found themselves at the receiving end, a number of them killed by the police and by Rakhine Buddhists (Human Rights Watch 2013). However, the Final Report of the Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State (2013) does not provide any figures of Kaman lives lost and Kaman properties destroyed during the first and second rounds of violence. Instead, the Report only gave figures by dividing them into the Rakhine side and the Bengali<sup>6</sup> side seemingly trying to portray the conflict as an occurrence which only affected Rakhine Buddhists and Bengali Muslims or Rohingyas. In other words, the suffering of the Kaman, who are a recognized minority group in Myanmar, was lost in all these Rakhine- and Rohingya-centric reporting.

According to the final report of the Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, the two-round violence resulted in: loss of lives of 192 people ((98 in the first round (32 Rakhines and 66 Muslims<sup>7</sup>) and 94 in the second round (26 Rakhines and 68 Muslims)); injuries of 265 people ((123 in the first round (51 Rakhines and 72 Muslims) and 142 people in the second round (97 Rakhines and 142 Muslims)); destruction of 8,614 houses ((5,330 houses in the first round (1,150 Rakhine-owned houses and 4,188 Muslim-owned houses) and 3,276 houses (42 Rakhine-owned houses and 3,234 Muslim-owned houses); destruction of 120 businesses in the two rounds (45 Rakhine-owned businesses and 75 Muslim-owned businesses) (Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State 2013: 20, Appendix C). However, the Final Report also contains data of loss of lives and

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<sup>5</sup> Serious intercommunal conflict broke out in Rakhine State in 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Rohingya is not accepted as a legitimated ethnonym by the Myanmar government and people as well. This paper will not discuss the details of this controversy here. But it will use Rohingya.

<sup>7</sup> 'Muslims' is used here because the figure, though difficult to ascertain in terms of identity and background, may include Rohingya, Kaman, Myedu and other mixed Muslims in Rakhine State.

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properties as claimed by the two sides: 128 dead and 169 injured (Rakhines) and 219 dead and 242 injured (Muslims) (Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State 2013: 22).

A casual look at these figures painstakingly provided by the Inquiry Commission, which is indeed a semi-governmental body due to inclusion of President U Thein Sein's advisors and those close to the government, may lead one to conclude that the conflict was inter-communal because both sides suffer from loss of human lives and properties. However, Muslims, including Kamans, have suffered a disproportionately severe impact of the conflict. I argue so for two main reasons. National Democratic Party for Development, a registered political party mainly composed of Muslims Rakhine State, claimed that it has a detailed list (name, age, address, and type of weapon used in killing) of about 500 people killed during the two rounds most of whom were Muslims (Aye Nai 2012). Although the party did not distinguish between Kaman, Rohingya, and other Muslims, at least a small percentage of them must have been Kaman because the second round of violence also occurred in Kaman-populated areas such as Kyaukphyu, Mrauk-U, Myebon and Thandwe. For example, five Kaman Muslims including a 94-year old woman were killed in Thabyu Chaing in Thandwe District in October 2013 (Fuller 2013). Also, 4,000 displaced Kaman Muslims are still confined to camps (Yen Snaing 2015), a fact which has been neither recognized nor explicitly stated by the Final Report, draft Rakhine State Action Plan and the Myanmar government. Despite a few media reports, ethnic Kaman Muslims' suffering was apparently unrecognized by both the Inquiry Commission and the Myanmar government who have apparently tried to Bengalize all Muslims in Rakhine State. Those 4,000 Kaman Muslims in camps also face travel restrictions. Actually, the community and the travel restrictions it faced in the 1990s and 2000s were little known until the occurrence of the 2012 violence.

As seen above, the Inquiry Commission has provided all of the statistics of casualties, injuries, and displacement in terms of only two sides – Rakhines and Bengalis – a rhetoric also adopted by the Myanmar government. This Bengalization of all Muslims of Rakhine State has effectively helped the government to evade its responsibility to protect the Kaman, which is one of the national groups. This is more obvious when it is seen in light of the use of 'taing-yin-tha' (national or indigenous) affixed to Rakhines throughout the Final Report and in all the government's pronouncements and publications on the conflict Being a national groups. They tend to differentiate between Rakhines and Muslims by stating that Rakhines are indigenous whereas Muslims are not, implying that the two sides are not equal and the former must be given priority. For example, in his latest media interview, Maj-Gen Maung Maung Ohn, Chief Minister of Rakhine State, stated: "There are two major ethnic groups in the state of Rakhine, those who have inhabited this land for a very long time and those who migrated from another country, the Bengalis" (Outlook India 2015).

In terms of displacement, about 140,000 Muslims were made homeless or displaced in 2012 either due to loss their homes or due to their inability to return to their original places some of which remain intact. On the other hand, there were only 3,500 Rakhine IDPs in November 2012 (Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State 2013: 28). According to the leaked Rakhine State Action Plan, which is still being revised by the Myanmar government, there are 1,738 Rakhine and 138,724 Muslim IDPs to be resettled as of September 2014 (Rakhine State Action Plan n.d.: 7). It means half of the Rakhine IDPs have been resettled since 2012. Although there have been offers by

the international community to build new houses for Muslim IDPs, the main obstacle in the way is the adamant calls by the Myanmar government and Rakhine Buddhists that all Muslim IDPs undergo a special citizenship check prior to their resettlement. This call for a special check of Muslim IDPs by the Myanmar government and Rakhine Buddhists, however unacceptable it is, does sound reasonable since almost all of the Rohingya in Myanmar are undocumented.

Although this paper is not concerned with the plight of the Rohingya since 2012, it must be stated here that the one-million-strong community who are concentrated in three townships in Northern Rakhine State (NRS) have been mostly affected by the violence and its aftermath. The Rohingya are unlike the Kaman in terms of possession of a recognized identity. Admittedly, the terms 'identity' and 'ethnic groups' are fluid concepts open to question and controversy, especially when it is government-recognized. It is indeed more reasonable to characterize Myanmar's 135 indigenous or national groups (Hla Min 2013: 171-174) as ethnic categories, following the classification by Anthony Smith (1999: 13) who defines them as "populations distinguished by outsiders as possessing the attributes of a common name or emblem, a shared cultural element (usually language or religion), and a link with a particular territory." In Myanmar, Kaman or Kamein, as it was often spelled, is a recognized ethnicity as one of seven sub-groups under the Rakhine group, the others being Rakhine, Mro, Thet, Khami, Daingnet, and Marmagyi. More importantly, they are the only Muslim community in Myanmar who enjoys such an ethnic status. Kamans trace their origin to the retreat of the Mogul prince Shah Shuja, second son of Emperor Shah Jahan, and his family and soldiers to Arakan in 1660. The 1931 census recorded 2,686 Kaman in Arakan (Yegar 1972, 1982, 2002). The exact Kaman population nowadays is not known. The Myanmar government is yet to announce statistics on ethnicity and religion of the last census conducted in 2014. However, Kaman leaders estimate the size of their community at around 50,000. Indeed, the size of the Kaman has even been a highly politicized issue due to the claims by Rakhines that Bengalis have used Kaman to secure identity cards. U Tin Hlaing Win, general secretary of Kaman National Development Party, highlighted the alleged penetration of Bengalis among Kamans in one of his interviews in November 2013 with *Narinjara*, a Rakhine news agency, probably to satisfy and make peace with Rakhines (*Narinjara* 2013).

In this way, over the last three years the Kaman identity, which was little known outside Rakhine State until 2012, became a 'political' subject for Kamans themselves, Rakhines, the government, and many other groups. In other words, Kamans found themselves becoming Kaman or becoming known as Kaman in the public imagination in Myanmar. However, becoming well-known has had its negative impacts because the 'Kaman' identity and the *acceptable* number of people associated with it have been increasingly problematized. Due to their ethnic identity, which is listed as one of the seven sub-groups under the Rakhine category and their religious identity, which is shared by the Rohingya, the tiny Kaman community compared to Rakhines and Rohingyas saw themselves sandwiched between the two largest groups living in Rakhine State. Amidst reemergence, or in other words re-reification, of ethnicity as an important channel for calling upon the government to provide group rights, Kamans have also been found to emphasize their indigenous status to secure protection from the government.

Interestingly, Kamans have been seen to employ a number of political strategies for survival since they were adversely affected especially during the second round of Buddhist-Muslim violence in October 2012. There are two important 'instrumentalist' strategies used by Kamans for their political and social survival as a tiny minority in Rakhine State in which Rakhine Buddhists have come to occupy a role more dominant than ever. The two strategies are: re-emphasis of their indigeneity and loyal to the Myanmar state and Rakhine Buddhists; and distancing themselves from their fellow Muslims, most of whom are Rohingyas. Indeed, the strategies did not emerge out of vacuum. Instead, they emerged in response to increasingly aggressive problematization by Rakhine Buddhists of the Kaman identity and Rakhines' tendency to homogenize all Muslims in Rakhine State as the same community.

Despite these rhetorical strategies that the leaders of Kaman National Development Party, they have not unfortunately fallen prey to Bengalization by fellow Rakhines and by the government as well. For example, Maj-Gen Maung Maung Ohn called Kamans 'guests' during one of his visits to a Muslim IDP camp in Myebon in May 2014 (Nan Mya Nadi 2014). On another occasion, he also told a meeting held in Sittwe in July 2014 that there are Muslims who have used fake Kaman identity to secure citizenship scrutiny cards or IDs (Maung Kan 2014). Rakhines have been more blunt and aggressive. For example, in the wake of the second round of violence, U Bat Di Ya, a Rakhine Buddhist monk, contended: "Kaman are also Kular [another spelling of *Kala*]. They are a kind of Kular race. They are the same blood. When incidents happen they unite with Kular, they don't stay on the Rakhine side" (Schearf 2012). On another occasion, a Rakhine man in his interview with VOA (Burmese) even contended that Kaman is not a genuine indigenous ethnic group, but a naturalized one, because it was made to be so by the government implying that Rakhines are the owners of Rakhine State (Voice of America 2012). When the issue of inclusion of 'Rohingya' as a right of self-identification became highly volatile amidst Rakhines' protests before the 2014 census was taken, Kamans joined with the other six groups including Rakhine and called for non-inclusion of the controversial ethnonym (RadioFreeAsia2014).

Actually, Kaman leaders have adopted these rhetorics apparently for self-survival since before 2012. For example, late U Shwe Bye (n.d.) emphasizes, in his unpublished manuscript written in the 1990s on the history of the Kaman, which is one of the few written accounts of the community, cultural Rakhinization or Burmanization expect difference in religious faith and loyalty to the state. Likewise, another published history of the Kaman written by Maung Sanda (Le Way) (2005), with the help of Kaman, also highlights Kaman Muslims' cultural norms and practices which are similar to Rakhines' and their loyalty to the Myanmar state by providing biographical sketches of a number of Kamans who have occupied senior positions in the public sector mainly in the twentieth century.

Although Maung Maung Ohn has reportedly promised to Kaman leaders that he would arrange rebuilding of houses for 4,000 Kamans, it does not seem to become reality due to his own prejudice against the community which he considers guests in Rakhine State. Still one third of Kamans do not possess citizenship scrutiny cards (Su Min Ko 2014). The rest – two-thirds of Kamans – who are supposed to have the cards are also being said to include those with fake identity. Rakhines did not even agree when 209 Muslims from an IDP camp in Myebon were given cards after scrutiny in



September 2014 (Aung Ye Maung Maung 2014), let alone 15,000-20,000 Kamans outside the IDP camps that are yet to be documented.

Therefore, the Kaman identity is expected to continue to be a highly charged issue in the politics of Rakhine State. Part of its community being denigrated as those with fake identity, the Kaman themselves will continue to fall prey to Rakhine nationalism and Rohingya-versus-Rakhine competition. Both the Union and Rakhine State governments will also continue to neglect the rights and plight of the Kaman, who occupy a special position as a tiny minority sandwiched between the supreme Rakhine community and the beleaguered Rohingya community, both of which are demographically huge. Kamans – the only government-recognized Muslim minority in Myanmar – will also continue to try their best to make peace with Rakhines by rejecting their fellow Muslims and to regain their lost rights both as citizens and as a recognized ethnic group. How all of these dynamics will play out in the near to middle future is yet to see, subject to political, social, cultural, and religious changes both in Rakhine State and elsewhere across the country.

### **Mandalayan Muslims During and After Violence in July 2014**

The Mandalay conflict is widely believed to originate in the news of rape of a female Buddhist staff in the early morning of 29 June 2014 by two Muslim brothers who own and run a tea shop in Mandalay. The rumor spread like fire on 30 June on Burmese-language social media pages mainly on Facebook. It started appearing on a well-known news site and was shared again by Ashin Wirathu, the famous anti-Muslim Buddhist monk based at Masoeyein Monastery in Mandalay. A conflict broke out the next day. It was during the month of Ramadan in which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. To add more fuel to the worsening conflict, Ashin Wirathu again wrote on his popular Facebook page on 3 July:

The July 1 and 2 incidents in Mandalay are not a clash of religions nor race but a Jihad. They are gathering in mosques in Mandalay under the guise of Ramadan but in reality they are recruiting and preparing for Jihad against us. The government of Myanmar must deal with these Islamic extremists and raid all suspicious mosques and homes. All Burmans<sup>8</sup> must be ready and not fall into these Muslims' traps. A warning to overseas Burmans to safeguard their homes and lives against extremist Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

In the morning of 3 July, U Tun Tun, a Buddhist, and U Soe Min Htwe, a Muslim, were killed, for which eleven Muslim men and four Buddhist men were prisoned for 10-13 years and 10 years respectively. A 9pm-5am curfew was imposed on 3 July and it remained until 11 August. Muslim-owned homes and vehicles were also vandalized on the conflictual nights. Even when the tensions were running very high, the local authorities of Mandalay permitted a long but disorderly procession of people on motorbikes and vehicles to go around Mandalay in holding U Tun Tun's funeral on 4 July. The crowd also destroyed a Muslim cemetery on the way (Justice Trust 2015). Upon critical

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<sup>8</sup> Burmans used here refers to Barmars who are the majority ethnic group in Myanmar and are Buddhists.

<sup>9</sup> Ashin Wirathu's Facebook post is translated and quoted in Justice Trust (2015: 21).

analysis and tracing by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the rape case turned out to be incorrect (Ministry of Home Affairs Statement dated 20 July 2014).<sup>10</sup>

On 7 July 2014, Myanmar President U Thein Sein gave a special radio speech to the people of Myanmar in the aftermath of the seemingly sectarian conflict in Mandalay mainly on 1 and 2 July which resulted in deaths of two men, a Muslim and a Buddhist, and damage of a number of Muslim properties. It was not the first time U Thein Sein gave a special talk on sectarian violence since his talks were broadcast during and after the sectarian violence in Rakhine State in 2012 and in other parts of Myanmar in 2013. Indeed, it was not the first time the Myanmar President spoke out on the Mandalay conflict. In his monthly radio speech given on 3 July, he said, though in a loose and general way:

Our country is composed of diverse ethnic races and of different religions. In such a country, only when all citizens live together and cooperate with one another in harmony, can the country be stable and peaceful and can the current reforms be successful. In order for them to be successful, I urge that actions, speeches and writings which may breed hatred among the people in the country be avoided. The events across the world have shown how hatred among citizens and that among ethnic races have brought out disharmony and hardships. Therefore, our society must condemn and act against hate actions, hate speeches, and hate writings.<sup>11</sup>

In all of the presidential speeches on sectarian conflicts in Myanmar, the wording of his special speech of 7 July on the case of Mandalay was striking. U Thein Sein said:

People of Mandalay have traditionally lived for ages in friendship without distinguishing one another in terms of race and religion. One usually helps with and participates in the other's festivals and social affairs. In spite of difference in religious faith, they have been famed as an ideal society for other parts [of Myanmar] due to their common identity of Mandalayans and their living together in peace and harmony.<sup>12</sup>

This highlight by U Thein Sein of the common identity of Buddhists and Muslims as being Mandalayans is highly provocative since he himself or any other responsible officials of the present government have never uttered the word 'common identity' during and after each and every one of the sectarian violent episodes which rocked various parts of Myanmar in 2012 and 2013. On the same day, President U Thein Sein's office also released a statement which profusely praised Mandalayans who, regardless of their religious affiliation, altogether tried their best to check the

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<sup>10</sup> The statement is reproduced on pages 10 and 24 of the *Myanma Ahlinn Daily* issued on 20 July 2014.

<sup>11</sup> My translation. The full text of his speech was reproduced on pages 1 and 3 of the *Myanma Alinn Daily* issued on 3 July 2014.

<sup>12</sup> My translation. The full text of his special speech was reproduced on pages 1 and 3 of the *Myanma Alinn Daily* issued on 8 July 2014.

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spread of the violence and protect Mandalay all the dwellers in the city love and cherish. The first two paragraphs of the statement, released in both Burmese and English,<sup>13</sup> read:

Mandalay, dynamic cultural city where people with different faiths live together harmoniously, had overcome the most difficult situation by the effective cooperation of its residents. Today's stability there is a result of the spirit of Mandalay residents, Civil Society Organizations and religious leaders who wish to maintain the reputation of politeness, tolerance and harmony of their great city together with the timely measures taken by the government. (7 Day Daily 2014)

Again, the words used by President's Office are noteworthy which highlighted involvement of all Mandalayans, its civil society, and religious leaders all of whom tried to save face and maintain the fame of Mandalay as a polite, tolerant and co-existing place. The Office has released a number of statements regarding the outbreak of various seemingly intercommunal conflicts in other parts of Myanmar but never has it used such words which pinpointed the common identity shared by the peoples, Buddhists and Muslims in this case, in those conflict areas.

Moreover, a writer by the pseudonym of *Mandalay-tha* (meaning Mandalayan in English) wrote in the *Myanma Alinn Daily*, a state newspaper:

The rumors surrounding religion and race exert a more serious impact than ordinary ones. Despite fuelled rumors, the tradition of living together in affection and harmony for many years and the same local identity as 'Mandalayans' regardless of religion have made Mandalay famed as an ideal society. Therefore, the Sangha, religious leaders, social leaders from both religious communities, city elders and dwellers faced the situation together and showed the value of mutual trust and cooperation, which is highly necessary in society, through the spirits of citizen and of Mandalayan. In spite of different religion and race, the people who have lived on the same land under the same roof and drunk the same water have helped one another through the spirit of Mandalayan. (A Mandalay-Tha 2014).

Apart from all of these remarks on the common identity of Mandalayan shared by both Buddhists and Muslims, Mandalay is notable in the sense that it was the last place which saw an outbreak of communal violence over the period from 2012 to 2014 when Myanmar as a whole faced unprecedented religious conflicts largely fueled by anti-Muslim hate messages. It is also notable that after Mandalay, Myanmar has not faced another serious anti-Muslim or Buddhist-versus-Muslim incident.

Muslims in Mandalay are a mixed community in terms of race or ethnicity. Many of them identify as *Pathi*, another contested term in Muslim politics in Myanmar nowadays. Muslims during the times of the Burmese kings were generically called *Pathi* or *Pathi Kala*. However, the Myanmar governments

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<sup>13</sup> The Burmese version of the statement included seven paragraphs and its English counterpart five paragraphs.

have not recognized it as a distinct ethnicity and therefore, *Pathi* is not among 135 groups. From the 1930s onwards when the Burmese nationalist movement calling for autonomy or independence from the British was gathering strength, many Muslims of upper Burma and some of lower Burma, including those in Mandalay, used another marker of identity – Bamar Muslims – highlighting the fact that they were *culturally* and *politically* Bamars who profess Islam. Bamar Muslim was accepted and used in public by then leaders of the nationalist movement such as U Nu who became the first prime minister of independent Burma. However, the term Bamar now is more exclusive than then because to be Bamar is to be Buddhist in common understanding. Therefore, the term is longer in vogue and is not recognized as a distinct ethnicity either. The British censuses used another term *Zerbadee* which means mixed progeny of (mostly Indian or South Asian) Muslim fathers and Bamar women. However, most Muslims, especially those from upper Burma, resent the term because it means they are mixed-blooded or half-caste implying that their political allegiance to Burma is questionable. Muslims of those days in upper Burma were proud of their political alliance with and involvement in the nationalist movement so they asserted they were Bamars too, a claim which was readily accepted by Bamar nationalist then who needed as many activists and followers as possible (Yegar 1972, 1982). However, this paper uses Mandalayan Muslims as a generic term. The term also fits the focus of this paper which is to highlight the role of local identity as Mandalayans proudly shared by both Buddhists and Muslims.

Despite the significant role Bamar Muslims played in the nationalist movement and in post-independence Burma until 1962 when the military came to power, the time has now changed, making things unfavorable for Muslims. Liberal and inclusive nationalism of the first half of the twentieth century has been replaced by a narrow and exclusive militarist nationalism of the *tatmadaw* since 1962. Therefore, the term *Bamar* is now reserved for Buddhists. Muslims are alien at least in a cultural sense since Islam is a guest religion, however long Muslims (at least a significant portion of the total) have lived in Myanmar. However, this national perception of Islam and Muslims as alien has not penetrated well into the minds of Mandalayan Buddhists, compared to that of Buddhists in other places such as Yangon.

Most of Mandalay Muslims trace their Mandalayan origins to the establishment of Mandalay by the Burmese king Mindon in 1857. Mindon's loyal subjects, many of whom were Muslims, were brought together from Amarapura. The Burmese Buddhist king was magnanimous towards his Muslim subjects by building and allowing the latter to build mosques near their quarters in the new royal capital. Due to their Burmese roots, the names of the mosques in Mandalay are notably different from that in places such as Yangon. Mosques in Mandalay have Burmese place names depending on where they are located whereas mosques in Yangon have names of Indian and Islamic origin. The size of the Mandalayan Muslim community is not known but the casual onlooker may notice their significant size and role in the economy and social and political life of Mandalay.

That Muslims of Mandalay have the same or similar start date of residence in Mandalay as their Buddhist counterparts and that most of the two communities served the last two kings of the Konbaung dynasty – King Mindon and King Thibaw seem to be the two important factors behind the emergence of a common local identity shared by both Buddhists and Muslims. Moreover, Mandalay did not receive hundreds of thousands of Indian/Muslim migrants during the British colonial rule like

Yangon did. Colonial Rangoon was a melting pot or a 'plural society' (Furnivall 1956) where most of the groups such as Burmese, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans mainly interacted among one another in the marketplace. Rangoon saw two serious intercommunal riots in the 1930s – the first one being anti-Indian and economically driven and the second one being anti-Muslim and religiously motivated (Chakravarti 1971; Ikeya 2011).

Mandalay was largely insulated against the colonial-era Indophobia which has gradually transformed over the second half of the twentieth century into Islamophobia (Egreteau 2011). In general, Buddhists and Muslims of Mandalay have never been pitted against each other for economic or social reasons. This historical factor seems to have played a strong role in the sustained development of the Mandalayan identity, although further research is required to corroborate this proposition. That said, Mandalay's history is not free of anti-Muslim incidents. In 1997, there were incidents in Mandalay in which a number of mosques were attacked and damaged by mobs often including Buddhist monks who are believed to be fake ones (Images Asia 1997). However, in those days the Mandalayan society was living under the tight control of the military dictatorship and there was no vibrant civil society either. Therefore, there was no chance for the Mandalayan community to highlight and call for protection of a common Mandalayan identity. The situation has totally changed. The Myanmar civil society had been enjoying significant political and civil freedoms such as freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. When faced with the conflict allegedly provoked by a suspicious but conventional script of a rape case involving a male Muslim instigator and a female Buddhist victim which is now the 'master trigger' in all anti-Muslim violent conflicts in the country, the Mandalayan society came out and called for defence of their city and common identity.

Indeed, the argument I am making here of the role of the common Mandalay identity shared by Buddhists and Muslims what effectively checked the further spread of the conflicts in July 2014 and its aftermath may be compared to that made by Ashutosh Varshney (2002) in his well-acclaimed study of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India. Varshney claims that civic identity shared by Hindus and Muslims in certain places in India were effective in preventing communal riots from occurring.

Therefore, although Mandalay Muslims undeniably suffered from a nationwide anti-Muslim hate campaign launched by the 969 movement and *Ma-Ba-Tha* due to their common religion of Islam shared by Rohingyas and Kamans in Rakhine State and other Muslims in non-Mandalay places, the Mandalayan civic identity shared by them and their Buddhist neighbors were an effective tool of social control and calm. Therefore, Mandalay Muslims' experience in the transition is found to be different from that of Rohingyas, Kamans, and Muslims in other places.

## **Conclusion**

To make a few general statements in conclusion, to be a Muslim in Myanmar nowadays is, arguably, the most difficult time in Myanmar's history at least since independence. Never has anti-Muslim violence at such an unprecedented level occurred. Never have Muslims of Myanmar, both Rohingya and non-Rohingya, faced such a time in which their identity is aggressively and emotionally problematized and alienated. Never have they lived with everyday Islamophobia and hate messages being spread across Myanmar by a nation-wide campaign such as *Ma-Ba-Tha* and 969. Never have

they lived with uncertainties and concerns about the future. If we would like to call it social suffering of a Muslim community in a transitioning polity, it is nothing else.

However, this paper has warned that such a sweeping generalizing argument misses a very important fact about Muslims of Myanmar. It is diversity among the so-called Muslim minority of Myanmar. Due to the unique discrimination and persecution of the Rohingya since the 1970s which has even increased in recent years, the international media and a few scholarly writings have largely focused on the Rohingya. This effectively makes one to overlook the other side of the Myanmar Muslim coin. By highlighting the experiences of two Muslim communities in Rakhine State, which has been torn apart by violent and non-violent sectarian conflict since 2012, and Mandalay, which also faced a spite of sectarian violence in 2014, this paper has argued that there is not a Muslim minority, but Muslim minorities, in Myanmar. Moreover, it has also highlighted that different Muslim groups have had different relational issues and problems with the Buddhist majorities in the respective places and with the state as well, subject to their constructed identities and space in which they live in.

The argument I have made in this paper has two important implications for policy and for further academic research. In terms of policy, any substantive policy prescriptions or suggestions on how to tackle with present and future violent and non-violent conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims should be made by keeping in mind that different Muslims groups of Myanmar are embedded in different social and political relations with the state and Buddhists as well. Academically, the argument I made above would have been made stronger if it could be buttressed by field research projects in Myanmar on how identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed on one hand and how identities are shared or confrontationally constructed by different groups in different locales. Therefore, two projects on Muslims of Myanmar in general and on how Buddhist-Muslim relations have fared over the last five decades seem to be two most worthwhile efforts for researchers.

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